

Bard

Bard College
Bard Digital Commons

Senior Projects Spring 2016

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2016

Senior Concert I: A Quiet Departure/Senior Concert II: 6 Statements

Matthew Charles Dowden
Bard College, md1338@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016



Part of the [Composition Commons](#), [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Other Music Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Dowden, Matthew Charles, "Senior Concert I: A Quiet Departure/Senior Concert II: 6 Statements" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. 132.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016/132

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Bard

Senior Concert I:

A Quiet Departure

Senior Concert II:

6 Statements

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of the Arts

of Bard College

by

Matthew Dowden

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

Throughout the process of writing and selecting material for two senior concerts I wanted to be honest both toward the musical abilities in my possession at the moment, and the directions I want to take in the future. Though the ideas that got me writing come from very different places in both concerts, I attempted to hold true to that base line of taking stock and trying to push forward to a place I want to be as a writer and performer. Rather than acting as a conclusion to this larger effort, both concerts *A Quiet Departure* and *6 Statements*, ended up revealing a moment of several ongoing processes.

Part I of the first concert, *A Quiet Departure*, included material I had been working on for the past several months. The pieces came about from experiments in writing either to highlight the guitar, or work out pieces in the small setting of a quintet or quartet. The opening piece “A Quiet Departure,” featured a small piano prelude as well as several guitar effects I wanted to highlight, such as looped swells made only with the volume knob of the electric guitar and a looping pedal. These swells were meant to physically resonate with the piano part, provide a second accompaniment to the guitar melody, and create a much larger sound with only two instruments. With the addition of liquid like vibrato of slide guitar and chimes of harmonic sweeps, the overall impression is a short and dreamy introduction. The following compositions that lean more towards an idea of jazz, came about from experiments in form and melodic writing. Most of these compositions hinge on the idea of writing an idiosyncratic melody which decides the shape of the piece. This technique resulted in some pieces with asymmetries such as the unbalanced, faux bebop tune, “Facsimilate.” In the pieces “Purple Mangosteen,” and “Charles and Bill” time signature changes and shifting moods are prevalent. Even though “Waltz for Hester” appears to be a common jazz waltz, the melody is the defining feature that unites the rhythm and the harmony. The forms, harmonies, and rhythms of these tunes are much less accessible without the melodies, which set these tunes apart from some other styles in jazz

where the form, rhythmic and harmonic structure often allow one to improvise a melody on the spot.

Part II of this concert represented a step forward into new musical traditions that came into my life midway in college. Studying and performing traditional Cuban music and Brazilian music led me to pick up the tres and cavaquinho. Both of these instruments are related to the guitar, my main instrument, but carry two very different traditions. The pieces “Lágrimas Negras,” “Preciso Me Encontrar,” and “Foi um Rio que Passou em Minha Vida” were selections of popular songs from the Cuban bolero tradition and Brazilian samba tradition. The introduction to Cuban and Brazilian music, as well as multiple students and teachers who perform this music has been a defining moment in my recent education. The choice to feature covers instead of compositions comes from my novice level of experience with the music. Despite being a newcomer I felt these songs were fitting examples, in style and difficulty, of how I currently interact with these two musical traditions.

Many of the pieces, either written or selected in this first concert, came to represent a specific connection with someone or something. For example, “A Quiet Departure” was a short reflective piece inwardly directed toward myself and one dimension of how I interact with the different sounds of my instrument. Compositions like, “Purple Mangosteen,” “Charles and Bill,” and “Waltz for Hester” were dedicated to two good friends, two grandfathers, and one dog respectively. Thinking about these influences and what they mean to me, gave direction towards the elements and overall mood of the pieces. “Lágrimas Negras” also came to illustrate a complex relationship in my life, because it is both a step into a new tradition of music, and a study of the Cuban side of my ethnic background. Once I began playing that music, I began to look deeper into that history of my family.

For my second senior concert, *6 Statements*, I wanted to follow a more unified theme. When I came across the work of former performance artist Tehching Hsieh, I knew I wanted to

incorporate his art into my music in some way. I decided for each of Hsieh's performances, I would write a piece to it or select a piece in the vein of a few elements I saw in his work.

The opening piece "Stalemates," like "A Quiet Departure," featured guitar sounds I wanted to incorporate into a composition, such as pick scraping and sliding notes. Hsieh's "Rope" piece, in which he spent a year tied at the waist to another performance artist, informed the moments of separate tension and agreement in this composition. For Hsieh's "No Art" statement I chose to play "Tact," a friend's composition I recorded several months prior. To highlight Hsieh's refusal to participate in art for a year, I decided to feature another artist's work. Both of these pieces were performed by a ten part electric guitar ensemble.

In addition to the electric guitar ensemble, I wanted to incorporate the larger sound of a jazz horn arrangement. For this band I wrote "8-7-6-0" and "Open Air Invitation," which were informed by Hsieh's "Time Clock," and "Outdoors" statements respectively. For "Time Clock" Hsieh punched a time card in a time clock every hour on the hour for one year. With this in mind I played with repeating horn melodic ideas, repeating and mechanical guitar lines, and a cyclical harmonic structure. In his "Outdoor" statement, Hsieh remained outside on the streets of New York City for a year. To write the accompanying piece "Open Air Invitation," I wanted to express musically my reaction to such a task. I finally settled on a fast paced swing tune that includes both a lightness, and an uncertain anxiety to evoke the hectic and boundless elements of that environment.

For the two art pieces I found most reflective, "Cell" statement and "13 year" statement, I decided on a duet between electric guitar and upright bass. Coincidentally, they are the first and last pieces of his career. For the cell piece, Hsieh remained in a self constructed prison cell without any interaction besides a friend dropping off some supplies every so often, and for the 13 year piece, Hsieh made works of art everyday over thirteen years but would not show any of them publicly. The accompanying pieces I selected were the jazz standard "Alone Together,"

and my own composition, “13 Years in the 12th House.” The most meaningful connection I took away from these pairings was the setting of electric guitar and upright bass. Despite the endless challenge of a very sparse instrumentation, the two instruments can compliment each other very well. On the one hand the spacial constraint of the cell is partnered with the guitar’s constraint of covering both melody and harmony in “Alone Together.” Also, the guitar is very prominent but still in this dependent relationship with the bass as accompaniment and center, much like Hsieh’s dependence on his friend for supplies. On the other hand, the sparseness of instrumentation in “13 Years in the 12th House,” augments the sincerity and reflection of the piece. The forward momentum is much more loose and the two instruments are playing more introverted, because this last performance piece seemed like Hsieh’s final personal statement on what art and his own career meant to him.

Throughout both of these concerts, I drew as much as possible from where I am currently as a musician. Both included an honest insight into what I am working with as a composer, a performer, and a multi-instrumentalist. Rather than working in only one of my interests, I chose to include as much of them as possible to best represent my efforts over the past four years and the paths I wish to pursue.